

# Business owners complain



Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

Vicki Dietrich carries chair she salvaged from art studio, while office workers remove belongings from Neary Business Center in the Pacific Garden Mall.



## Santa Cruz quake response upsets mall merchants

By Bob Levy  
Mercury News Staff Writer

There has been much talk about Santa Cruz pulling together after the Oct. 17 earthquake, and for the most part everyone has been getting along.

But some people, mostly business owners at the heavily damaged Pacific Garden Mall, are angry and frustrated with the city's response to the disaster.

Peter Gergen, whose Hallmark store at Lincoln Street and the mall was destroyed by the quake and demolished by the city, contends that he was not given

enough time to remove merchandise.

"I'm really bitter about this. They say they care, but they don't," Gergen said. "I really feel I've been wronged. . . . It's my money, so they have no reason to care."

Gergen, who also has a store in Capitola Mall, said he doesn't think he'll return to downtown Santa Cruz.

"I may get over this, but I doubt it."

Business owners are also questioning why it took — or in some cases, is still taking — so long for them to be allowed into their undamaged buildings.

Stephan Sternat, owner of Stephan's

Fine Jewelry on Walnut Avenue, just off the mall, said he and about a dozen others had to stage a sit-in at the city manager's office before officials decided to let them into their undamaged building.

Sternat, who was cleaning counters in his store Wednesday, 24 hours after finally being allowed inside, said, "I'm here now, so I can't really complain anymore."

But, he said, he and neighboring merchants in the Old Theater building didn't get the consideration from the city that

they felt they deserved.

"It was our turn to get some attention, but we had to go and get it."

Sternat said he understands that the city is doing the best it can, but he wonders if things might have gone more smoothly had officials been better prepared for the quake.

City Manager Richard Wilson defended the city's position Wednesday, while acknowledging that the situation has been difficult:

"Have we met everybody's needs? No.

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# Santa Cruz officials called insensitive

## City manager defends access policies

*MERCHANTS, from Page 1B*

Have there been foul-ups? Yes. But I think we have accommodated people to the best of our ability. . . . I feel pretty comfortable with what we've done."

The demolition of the Cooper House and other historic buildings also has been a source of conflict. Last week's razing of the Cooper House, the 19th century courthouse that was turned into a collection of shops in the early 1970s, infuriated Fred Gray, a longtime community historian and activist.

"In a sanely constructed world," Gray said, "our city council . . . would have at a minimum sought to put off the demolition of Cooper House as long as possible. They would have struggled to find a way to preserve the structure, looked for preservation money, allowed time for the private effort to raise funds. . . .

"Instead we saw a rush to judgment, a blindingly quick approval by the city of the request by the owner for a permit to demolish."

Wilson, whose emergency powers have given him authority to make most of the key decisions in Santa Cruz recently, said he is not surprised by the complaints.

"I'm sure there are lots of people with good cause to be unhappy," he said. "This has been a very grim period."

But Wilson said most of his decisions were based on safety considerations. That was particularly true in determining how much access was allowed to condemned buildings, including Gergen's, where engineers said lives were on the line every time somebody went inside.

Wilson said delays have occurred because of the priorities that he and other city officials set

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**"I'm really bitter about this. They say they care, but they don't."**

— *Peter Gergen,*  
*Hallmark store owner*

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up immediately after the quake. He said matters considered more important than allowing people back into businesses included searching the mall for bodies, protecting inventory in exposed stores, inspecting all buildings and demolishing those that were dangerous.

Only now, he said, has it seemed appropriate to begin letting people back in.

"We're doing that as fast as we can. . . . We want people to go to work. We want businesses to thrive."

Wilson said it would not have been possible to have a plan to cover all the problems posed by the quake.

For example, "We couldn't have been equipped to deal with 400 or 500 requests for access." When the requests poured in, the task was turned over to the Downtown Association, a group of volunteers, many of whom suffered serious losses of their own.

The city manager also said he has no apologies for allowing demolition of the Cooper House.

"People who have looked at the structural reports have not questioned the decision," Wilson said. "It was probably the building that sustained the most damage."